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ABSTRACT

This digest uses a question-and-answer format to address issues that parents should consider when thinking about the total communication (TC) approach for a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. Total communication is explained as the use of any/all modes of communication (manual, oral, auditory, and written) depending on the needs of the child. Use of TC by hearing parents and teachers usually involves combining speaking and signing. Benefits of the TC approach are noted, such as its ability to open all avenues and modes of communication for the deaf child and its demonstrated effectiveness in fostering the child's psychosocial, linguistic, and academic development. Limitations of TC include poor results when inadequately implemented, problems arising from the inherent differences between spoken and visual communication, and difficulties in individualization. Parents are provided with a list of questions to ask before choosing the total communication option. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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Larry Hawkins and Judy Brawner

What is meant by the total communication approach?

Total communication (TC), a term coined by Roy Holcomb in 1967, is the title of a philosophy of communication, not a method (Scouten, 1984). Total communication may involve one or several modes of communication (manual, oral, auditory, and written), depending on the particular needs of the child. The original expectation of TC was for teachers to use the communication method(s) most appropriate for a particular child at a particular stage of development. Therefore, there would be situations when spoken communication might be appropriate, other situations where signing might be appropriate, others that would call for written communication, and still others where simultaneous communication might work best (Solit, Taylor & Bednarczyk, 1992).

Total communication seemed to be the bridge that allowed a crossover from an oral-only philosophy to a philosophy that embraced sign language. During the 1970's and 1980's most schools and programs for children who are deaf, as well as most major organizations in the field supported the TC philosophy. Today, although the debate seems to be between TC programs and bilingual-bicultural programs, "simultaneous communication is the most common form of communication used in educational settings for deaf children" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 469).

Who can choose a total communication option?

TC may be used by families and educators. Since over 90% of parents of children who are deaf have hearing themselves (Moores, 1996; Rawlings & Jensema, 1977), many believe that TC is a philosophy that will allow flexibility without eliminating any of the options. By using a total approach of speaking and signing, all members of the family,— those who are deaf as well as those who are hearing,—have continuous access to the communication occurring in their environment (Baker, 1992).

Teachers may choose to provide TC options in their classrooms. Those who choose this approach have the responsibility and obligation of acquiring the skills necessary to meet all of the child's communication needs.

What are the benefits of a total communication approach?

Most learning occurs through interaction with other people. Such learning is possible only when individuals are able to communicate with understanding. Likewise, the quality of the relationship between a child and her or his parents is dependent on the quality of communication existing between them. Thus, the choice of communication modes/methods that will be the most effective and beneficial to a child at home and in the classroom is of utmost importance.

The main benefit of TC is that it can open all avenues and modes of communication for the deaf child. Parents and teachers might be reluctant to choose one mode of communication over another. TC, however, allows a variety of combinations. Research studies have repeatedly demonstrated the beneficial effects of total communication in all areas of deaf children's development, whether psychosocial, linguistic, or academic (Vernon & Andrews, 1990). If the effectiveness of communication is more important than the form it takes (Kaplan, 1996), then TC is beneficial because it allows the child to use the form that is best for him in any given situation.

What are the limitations of a total communication approach?

One limitation of TC is that, while the theory may be sound, it may not be put into practice accurately enough in some situations. Many students who are deaf are immersed in a form of simultaneous communication that does not match their level of linguistic (language) readiness or ability. In the classroom, TC often becomes a simultaneous practice of combining manual components (signs and fingerspelling) with spoken components used in English word order. Although TC educational programs will differ on the selection of a manual system, all seem to combine signing with speech. The very nature of the two modes (spoken and visual) may cause signers/speakers to alter their messages to accommodate one or the other mode, causing a compromise between the two methods (Wilcox, 1989). Although the idea of individualization is at the heart of TC, teachers are limited to how many different modes they can use at one time. It may be impossible for one teacher to meet all the communication needs that might be present in a single classroom of children who are deaf and hard of hearing. For example, do the students really see a good representation of either English or ASL when the teacher or parent uses them inconsistently, or are they seeing only poor examples of broken English or ASL? Researchers do not agree as to whether a manually coded English system leads to better reading and writing scores (Mayer & Lowenbraun, 1990).

What are some questions to ask before choosing this option?

1. Most members of the Deaf culture in the United States use American Sign Language. Will children in a TC program be able to communication with members of the Deaf culture?
2. Can English be represented fully with sign language?
3. If TC is chosen as an option and signing is a part of that option, what kind of signing will be used? Are there benefits in using an English-based sign system? What are the benefits of ASL?
4. Can ASL be an option in a TC program?
5. Can one talk and sign ASL at the same time without one having a negative effect on the other?
6. How can a teacher who talks and signs English meet the needs of children who sign ASL?
7. Can parents more readily learn signed English or ASL?

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The majority of public school programs practice the TC (simultaneous) method. Information on TC and TC programs can be obtained from most State departments of education. A teacher or administrator from a school for students who are deaf may provide valuable insight. Many national organizations have position papers concerning TC, although many have discarded them as being outdated, and the *American Annals of the Deaf* has published numerous articles on this topic. The best source to consult, however, may be another parent who has used this option.

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